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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CARACAS 000906

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SUBJECT: THE THIRD MOTOR OF CHAVEZ' REVOLUTION:
BOLIO-SOCIO-PEDAGOGY

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REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary. President Hugo Chavez and his brother Adan Chavez, are leading ambitious Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) efforts to transform the country's educational system from top to bottom. The proposed reforms and a public education "Morality and Enlightenment" campaign are designed to promote socialist ideology to all citizens and increase the central government's control over public and private educational institutions. Previous BRV attempts to implement changes to the educational system elicited surprisingly strong protests from civil society and forced the BRV into a tactical retreat. Education reform remains a politically sensitive issue, though educational and civil society leaders appear resigned to sweeping BRV changes and are concentrating on contesting and diluting the actual implementation of such reform. Based on the BRV's demonstrated administrative incompetence, the proposed reach of this BRV initiative will likely, at least in the near term, exceed its grasp. It is also likely to further hobble Venezuela's beleaguered education system. End Summary.

Morality and Enlightenment Campaign

12. (SBU) Early in 2007, President Chavez designated a "Morality and Enlightenment" public education campaign to be the third motor of his five-engine "socialist" revolution. He subsequently named his older brother and Education Minister Adan Chavez to lead this government-led effort to "demolish the old values of individualism, capitalism, of selfishness" in favor of "socialist" values. Prior to becoming Education Minister, Adan Chavez was Venezuela's Ambassador to Cuba, and he is widely perceived to be committed to importing aspects of the Cuban educational system. The Venezuelan president frequently cites a line from a famous speech of independence leader Simon Bolivar ("Morality and enlightenment are the poles of a republic") and Che Guevara's concept of the formation of the "new man" as inspirations for this new initiative.

13. (SBU) In late February, President Chavez named a 14-member advisory committee to assist his brother with this ideological drive. Higher Education Minister Luis Acuna, Science and Technology Minister Hector Navarro, and Culture

Minister Francisco Sesto, National Assembly Member Cristobal Jimenez, and National Radio President Helena Salcedo are among the panel members. On February 21, Education Minister Adan Chavez commissioned 480 "brigade members" as the "first wave" of the "Morality and Enlightenment" campaign. By mid-March, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) claimed to have trained 11,000 "brigade members" on the way to a stated goal of 100,000 trained volunteers by late May.

14. (SBU) Brigade members receive three to five days of training and are reportedly provided related materials, including copies of the 1999 Constitution, selected writings of Simon Bolivar, information on 19th century military leader and reformer Ezequiel Zamora, the works of Simon Rodriguez (philosopher, educator and Bolivar's tutor), books by Che Guevara, and education ministry videos. Brigade members are encouraged to explain various systems of social organization, but with a view toward highlighting the "need" for socialism. The volunteers will also be encouraged to trumpet the achievements to date of Chavez' "Bolivarian revolution."

15. (SBU) The BRV is relying heavily on the Francisco de Miranda Front, a militantly pro-Chavez youth movement, as well as on members of its social missions, university groups, employees of the ministries of Education, Culture, and Science and Technology, and Community Council leaders, to implement this indoctrination effort. In addition, Minister of Popular Power for Labor Jose Ramon Rivero is proposing the creation of a special institute that would carry the "Morality and Enlightenment" campaign onto the factory floor by training "worker councils". Rivero also proposes that workplaces set aside four hours of work for "socialist formation."

16. (SBU) President Chavez personally launched the "Morality and Enlightenment" campaign for the armed forces during an April 27 nationally-televised ceremony at the Tiuna Fort in Caracas. Chavez swore in some 300 members of the Armed

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Forces, 300 members of other state entities, and 200 cadets as "brigade members" at the start of their five-day training. Military coordinator of the effort, Army General Carlos Mata Figueroa, said further training session would take place at other military bases in the second week of May. General Mata concluded his remarks by noting that he could not conceive that anyone could be "a child of Venezuela without being Bolivarian, revolutionary, and socialist."

Education Reform

17. (SBU) Venezuela has a long history of state-directed education. Independence-era pedagogue Simon Rodriguez promoted grand ideas about state education and has been glorified by successive Venezuelan governments - including the BRV. Rodriguez was an early tutor and later confidante of Simon Bolivar, and Bolivar eventually named him "Director of Public Education, Physical Sciences, Mathematics and Arts and General Director of Mines, Agriculture, and Public Thoroughfares of the Bolivian Republic." While successive governments never implemented Rodriguez's ideas, he nevertheless implanted the romantic notion of a need for concerted and state-directed "democratic formation" deep into the Venezuelan imagination.

18. (SBU) Antonio Guzman Blanco, dictator and thrice president of Venezuela between 1870 and 1888, made Rodriguez's vision of state-mandated education real, decreeing obligatory and free public education in 1870 to put the responsibility of education in the hands of the state and establish the first expression of the "Estado Docente," or "Teaching State." Blanco decreed an obligatory curriculum of general moral principles, enforced by an extensive administrative apparatus of Parish and Neighborhood Committees reporting to a central

Ministry of Development. By 1872, in response to the ongoing strength of private (usually Catholic) education, Blanco issued a decree to regulate the content of private schools, and suppressed university autonomy and seized university lands.

¶9. (SBU) Chavez' initial Blanco-inspired and ideologically tinged efforts to assert even greater government control over Venezuela's educational system generated significant opposition and were a contributing factor to the short-lived April 2002 coup and to the 2004 presidential recall referendum. Education reform remains a particularly sensitive, even touchstone, political issue, and the BRV has moved cautiously since the first wave of civil society resistance. The National Assembly passed the first draft of a comprehensive Education Law on August 8, 2001 (the unicameral NA must approve a bill twice before passing it to the President for possible promulgation), but that bill languished in the face of public protests. A Special Education Commission of the NA released a redraft of the 2001 proposal on July 22, 2005, but the 100 percent pro-Chavez NA has not acted upon it.

¶10. (SBU) The Venezuelan president has the authority to issue a decree-law that overhauls the educational system under the Enabling Law passed January 31 by the National Assembly. After some initial confusion as to whether Chavez intended to do so or allow the National Assembly to retain this issue, Education Minister Adan Chavez told the media that the National Assembly would continue to take the lead on this issue. Education watchdog organizations believe Chavez and other senior BRV officials are waiting for constitutional changes before moving ahead with education reform. They predict that Article 102, which states in part that "education is grounded in the respect of all currents of thought," will be changed to usher in a system based exclusively on "Bolivarian and socialist humanism." Contrary to the prevailing local sentiment, Adan Chavez told the media recently that education should not be an instrument of social mobility.

¶11. (SBU) Private school officials are particularly concerned about elements of the new law that inject the state directly into their institutions. The redrafted Article 15 states that "social responsibility and solidarity" are the basic principles for "citizen formation" at all levels. The redrafted Article 18 underscores the importance preparing students to participate in "social transformation processes." Many critics are concerned that Articles 15 and 18 are code for the Bolivarian mobilization of students. Private school

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officials are also concerned that the rewritten Article 38 gives the government wide latitude to interpret the principle of educational autonomy.

Higher Education

¶12. (C) Autonomous universities played an important role in the consolidation of democracy in the second half of the 20th century. However, public and private universities are starting to feel pressure from the BRV's "21st Century Socialism." During a lunch hosted by the Ambassador, several rectors from leading universities reported that the BRV had a multi-pronged approach to insert greater control over higher education. They said that, first, Chavez has set up an extensive parallel universe of well-funded Bolivarian universities and institutes. Second, the BRV has implemented a funding strategy to deny needed resources for uncooperative institutions. For example, the BRV approves all budgets by line-item and has reduced funding for books, magazines, libraries, research, and other "white collar" university activities. Third, the BRV directly supplements the salaries of professors and administrative personnel in what some

interpret as an effort to make them more vulnerable to government control. The BRV also sets upper limits on tuition increases.

¶13. (C) In addition, the rectors expressed their alarm at the BRV's creeping politicization of education. The rector of a teacher's college expressed particular concern that the first graduates of competing Bolivarian institutions, although less rigorous academically, may have a leg up in placing students in government teaching positions. The rectors also noted that their campuses remain overwhelmingly anti-government and anti-Chavez, but that student bodies are generally not politically active. The BRV has tried to manipulate student elections in favor of pro-government candidate slates. The BRV is even pressing specious criminal charges against University of the Andes student leader Nixon Moreno, who is currently residing at the Apostolic Nunciature in Caracas and seeking asylum to a third country. The rectors are not coordinating their responses to BRV higher education initiatives, but are trying to "lay low" and/or incorporate some pro-government persons as a means of buying peace with the BRV.

NGO and Civil Society Resistance

¶14. (C) Opposition to Chavez' educational reform plans is more muted today than it was in the recent past. Leonardo Carvajal, leader of the prominent NGO watchdog "Education Assembly," told poloff recently that his organization is focused on providing its own democratic training to teachers rather than attempting to organize street protests. He said his group is resigned to the BRV enacting an ideologically-loaded education reform package, but believes that the BRV will have great difficulty in implementing such a program, particularly if civil society organizations successfully reach out directly to teachers first. Carvajal stressed that his NGO and opposition political parties have only a fraction of their former ability to mobilize demonstrations on the issue of education.

¶15. (C) Catholic Church leaders have publicly raised their concerns that the BRV intends to both reduce the Church's practice of providing state-subsidized religious instruction at public schools and attack the autonomy of Catholic schools. President Chavez has publicly railed against Catholic bishops in speeches since early January, putting the Church leadership on the defensive. Article 8 of the new draft law would place the responsibility for religious education in the hands of families. Catholic and evangelical groups have been seeking BRV clarification that they may still provide religious instruction on school grounds, even if after normal school hours. Catholic Church leaders also argue that state-subsidized Catholic schools provide higher quality education at lower cost to the government. Representatives of all denominations complain that the government has cut off any dialogue with civil society on education reform.

Comment

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¶16. (C) As a "revolutionary motor," socialist education is a much longer term effort -- but one more fundamentally "revolutionary" -- than some of the other motors. Issuing decrees under the Enabling Law and enacting changes to the constitution may create the structure of a Bolivarian state, but educating the successor generation may create a more fundamental Bolivarian society. Committed Chavistas appear to believe that a successful "Morality and Enlightenment" campaign and comprehensive educational reform will safeguard the revolution indefinitely. The BRV may also be counting on

the threat of educational reform to weaken the opposition. The mere indoctrination effort is already a primary factor in driving educated and opposition-minded Venezuelans into exile. We often hear from educated Venezuelans that they can stomach many things, except the BRV "messing with my kids."

17.(C) Venezuela, the land of whiskey and oil, has not traditionally been fertile ground for ideologies or particularly disposed to collectivism. The jury will be out for a long time on whether the third motor of the revolution will gain traction in or out of the classroom. Opposition leaders are skeptical that the BRV, so incompetent in most areas of administration, will be able to successfully carry out so complex a task as to fundamentally transform the Venezuelan mindset, long receptive to capitalism, consumerism, and democracy.

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